

ANTI-CONTAMINATION COATED MULTI-LAYER INSULATION

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to multi-layer insulation blankets used to
5 insulate spacecraft and the like, and more particularly to improving the long-term
effectiveness of multi-layer insulation blankets by inhibiting the presence of
contaminants that can increase the solar absorptance of the blankets.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

10 Multi-layer insulation (MLI) blankets are useful in a number of applications. One
application is insulating spacecraft. In this regard, remote sensing scientific spacecraft as
well as commercial communications spacecraft require highly insulative MLI blankets to
minimize undesirable heat intrusion and diurnal temperature swings. The insulative
value of MLI blankets is generally determined by factors such as the overall number of
15 layers included in the blanket, the extent of conductive shorting between adjacent layers,
the quality of edge seams and closures, and the number and extent of penetrations
through the blanket. However, these are not the only factors that can affect the insulative
value of a MLI blanket.

The solar absorptance of the outer layer of a MLI blanket is also an important
20 factor in determining the overall insulative value of the MLI blanket. In this regard,
limited attention has been paid to the optical properties of the outer layer of MLI
blankets, other than typically designing the blanket to achieve a high infrared emittance
value of approximately 0.80. However, the solar absorptance of the outer layer, either
after long-term contamination and ultraviolet (UV) degradation effects or due to inherent
25 beginning-of-life (BOL) properties typically approaches the infrared emittance value,
yielding an equivalent black body surface with steady-state temperatures of around 125
°C when directly illuminated with solar radiation in space.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, the present invention provides a MLI blanket and related method of improving a MLI blanket that ensures that the solar absorptance of the MLI blanket is maintained at or below an acceptable threshold level. This is accomplished through the use of an anti-contamination coating that reduces the presence of organic residues and the like on the outer layer of the MLI blanket. This ensures that the reflective properties of the MLI blanket are maintained so that a sufficient amount of solar radiation incident on the MLI blanket is reflected and only a limited amount is absorbed. This improves the efficiency of the MLI blanket by reducing heat flux due to solar radiation, preventing such heat from being absorbed by the MLI blanket outer layer before it can conduct or radiate through the internal layers of the MLI blanket. Reducing the amount of heat absorbed by the MLI blanket due to solar radiation allows fewer insulative layers to be incorporated into the construction of the MLI blanket while still maintaining the same insulative capability as compared to a conventional MLI blanket with additional insulative layers required to compensate for the increased heat flux due to solar radiation. Having fewer layers in the MLI blanket provides several advantages including, for example, increased conformability to the contour of the spacecraft or other structure, lower weight, and less manufacturing complexity and cost.

In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a MLI blanket attachable to a structure intended for use in vacuum conditions includes an outer sheet of thermally insulative plastic material and one or more inner sheets of thermally insulative plastic material between the outer sheet and the structure when the MLI blanket is attached to the structure. In this regard, the structure may comprise a spacecraft such as, for example, a communications or remote sensing satellite. However, the structure may comprise other types of spacecraft as well as possibly even terrestrial structures utilized in artificial vacuum conditions. The outer sheet and inner sheet(s) are typically coextensive with one another. Furthermore, there may be one or more layers of lightweight material (e.g., glass fiber or nylon mesh or netting) between each adjacent sheet that maintain spacing between the sheets and inhibit undesired physical contact between adjacent sheets. Also, a layer of reinforcement material (e.g., glass fiber, nylon

mesh, or netting) may be bonded to one or more sheets to provide strengthening of the blanket and to prevent the propagation of tears.

The outer sheet includes a reflective surface on a side thereof facing away from the structure (e.g., the space facing side) when the multi-layer insulation blanket is attached to the structure. In this regard, the outer sheet of thermally insulative plastic material may, for example, comprise metallized polyimide material or metallized polyester material, with the metallization typically being on at least the outer surface thereof and preferably on both sides thereof. The inner layer(s) may, for example, comprise polyimide material or polyester material, which may or may not be metallized on one or both sides thereof. A coating of anti-contaminant material overlies the reflective surface of the outer sheet. In addition to the coating of anti-contaminant material, there may typically be a high emittance layer between the reflective surface and the coating of anti-contaminant material. Also, there may be an electrically conductive layer, either overlying the layer of anti-contaminant material or between the coating of anti-contaminant material and the high emittance layer.

The coating of anti-contaminant material comprises a material that is effective to induce the breakdown of organic residues on the outer surface of the outer sheet when the MLI blanket is exposed to ultraviolet or near-ultraviolet radiation (e.g., when the spacecraft is exposed to solar radiation during portions of the spacecraft's orbit when it is out of the Earth's shadow). In this regard, the anti-contaminant material may comprise a photocatalytic material, such as, for example, a photoactive transition metal oxide. Such photocatalytic materials catalyze the breakdown of organic residues by generating free carriers when exposed to UV or near-UV radiation. The resulting conduction-band electrons and valence-band holes interact with bound oxygen in the organic residues to form radicals and thereby break down the organic residues.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a method for inhibiting the formation of organic residues on the outer surface of a MLI blanket attachable on a structure intended for use in vacuum conditions includes the step of coating an outer surface of an outer layer of the MLI blanket that faces away from the structure when the multi-layer insulation blanket is attached to the structure with a photocatalytic material. In this regard, the photocatalytic material may comprise a

photoactive transition metal oxide. Generally, the photocatalytic material is coated over a high emittance layer or over an electrically conductive layer on the outer surface of the outer layer of the MLI blanket. Thereafter, the photocatalytic material coated outer surface of the outer layer of the MLI blanket is exposed to ultraviolet radiation and/or near-ultraviolet radiation to activate the photocatalytic material to catalyze the breakdown of organic residues on the outer surface of the outer layer of the MLI blanket. In one embodiment of the method, the structure comprises a spacecraft, and the step of exposing the photocatalytic material coated outer surface of the MLI blanket comprises exposing the spacecraft to solar radiation in space.

These and other aspects and advantages of the present invention will be apparent upon review of the following Detailed Description when taken in conjunction with the accompanying figures.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

For a more complete understanding of the present invention and further advantages thereof, reference is now made to the following Detailed Description, taken in conjunction with the drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 a cross-sectional view of one embodiment of a MLI blanket in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 2 a perspective view illustrating a typical communication satellite having MLI blankets attached thereon;

FIG. 3 is a graph showing frequency change (mass change) as a function of time under UV radiation illustrating the deposition rates of organic contaminants on a thermal quartz microbalance sensor both with and without a TiO_2 coating;

FIG. 4 is a graph showing frequency change (mass change) as a function of time for a pre-deposited film with UV radiation;

FIG. 5 is a graph showing CO_2 response as a function of UV radiation time illustrating the photocatalytical effectiveness of WO_3 in preventing and/or removing organics under vacuum conditions; and

FIG. 6 is a graph showing CO₂ response as a function of UV radiation time illustrating the photocatalytical effectiveness of ZnO in preventing and/or removing organics under vacuum conditions.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 shows a cross-sectional view of one embodiment of an improved MLI blanket 10 in accordance with the present invention. In FIG. 1, the relative thickness of the various layers may not necessarily be depicted to scale. The MLI blanket 10 includes a plurality of coextensive sheets 20, 30, 40, 50 of a flexible thermally insulative plastic material such as, for example, polyimide (e.g., Kapton®) or polyester (e.g., Mylar®). One or more of the sheets 20, 30, 40, 50 may be coated on one or both sides with a reflective metallic material such as, for example, aluminum, silver, or other appropriate metals or alloys thereof. In this regard, the sheets 20, 30, 40, 50 of coated thermally insulative plastic material may also be referred to herein as the metallized layers 20, 30, 40, 50.

In the embodiment illustrated, the first or outermost metallized layer 20 comprises a sheet of Kapton® or Mylar® with a silver coating 22 on the outer side 20A and an aluminum coating 24 on the inner side 20B of the sheet 20. The silver coating 22 on the outermost side 20A of sheet 20 provides the MLI blanket 10 with, among other properties, an outer surface that is reflective to solar radiation and eliminates the problem of UV and electron-proton darkening of the Kapton® or Mylar® substrate. The metallized second layer 30 also comprises a sheet of Kapton® or Mylar® having aluminum coatings 32, 34 on the outer and inner sides 30A, 30B of the sheet 30. The third layer 40 comprises a sheet of Kapton® or Mylar® having aluminum coatings 42, 44 on the outer and inner sides 40A, 40B of the sheet 40. The fourth or innermost metallized layer 50 comprises a sheet of Kapton® or Mylar® having aluminum coatings 52, 54 on the outer and inner sides 50A, 50B of the sheet 50. Although the metallized layers 20, 30, 40, 50 in the presently described embodiment consist of a Kapton® or Mylar® substrate metallized with aluminum on both sides thereof, the metallized layers 20, 30, 40, 50 may in general be comprised of any suitable flexible thermally insulative plastic substrate that is metallized with an appropriate low emittance material on one or

both sides thereof. Where desired, one or more of the metallized layers 20, 30, 40, 50 may be loaded with carbon or the like to reduce its transparency.

Between adjacent metallized layers 20, 30, 40, 50 there are mesh or netting layers 60, 62, 64 comprised of, for example, glass fiber, nylon, or other low conductivity materials. The mesh layers 60, 62, 64 maintain spacing between adjacent metallized layers 20, 30, 40, 50 to reduce undesired contact there between that results in undesired enhanced heat conductivity through the MLI blanket 10. Although FIG. 1 shows a MLI blanket 10 having four metallized layers 20, 30, 40, 50, in other embodiments, MLI blankets in accordance with the present invention may have fewer or more metallized layers. Also, in other embodiments, there may be no mesh layer or more than one mesh layer between adjacent metallized layers. Further, there may also be layers of reinforcement material (not shown) bonded to one or more of the Kapton® or Mylar® sheets 20, 30, 40, 50.

Overlying the silver coating 22 on the outer surface 20A of the outermost metallized layer 20 there is a high emittance layer 70 that helps maintain the infra-red emissivity of the MLI blanket 10 on the order of about 0.80. The high emittance layer 70 is comprised of a material such as, for example, quartz, glass, silicon nitride, or silicon oxy-nitride, that is generally transparent to solar radiation and is relatively impervious to the deleterious effects of UV, proton, and electron radiation. The high emittance layer 70 should be of an appropriate thickness to provide needed flexibility, solar transparency and infra-red emissivity on the order of 0.80. In this regard, the high emittance layer is generally in the range of 15 to 50 μm thick, and is most typically about 25 μm thick.

Overlying the high emittance layer 70 is an anti-contamination coating 80 deposited thereon. The anti-contamination coating 80 is comprised of a photocatalytic material. A number of different photocatalytic materials are appropriate. For example, the photocatalytic material may be a semiconductor material selected from the group consisting of photoactive transition metal oxides, including, but not limited to TiO_2 , ZnO , WO_3 , CaTiO_3 , SnO_2 , MoO_3 , NbO_5 , Fe_2O_3 , Ta_2O_5 , and $\text{Ti}_X(\text{Zr}_{1-X})\text{O}_2$, where X has a value of between 0 and 1. Preferred photocatalytic materials are TiO_2 , ZnO , WO_3 . Compound semiconductors, including, but not limited to ZnS , ZnSe , and CdS are also useful photocatalytic materials. The anti-contamination coating 80 may be applied on the high

emittance layer 70 overlying the silver coating 22 on the outer surface 20A of the outer metallized layer 20 as a thin film using any number of a variety of conventional techniques utilized in forming thin films during the fabrication of integrated circuits, including, but not limited to sputtering, chemical vapor deposition (CVD), plasma enhanced chemical vapor deposition (PECVD), and physical vapor deposition (PVD).
5 Regardless of how it is applied, the anti-contamination coating 80 should not be so thick that it substantially interferes with the reflective properties of the outer surface 20A of the outer metallized layer 20. In this regard, the anti-contamination coating is preferably between about 2 nm and 200 nm thick, although the most desired thickness can vary
10 based on factors such as the specific photocatalytic material employed and the durability required.

For spacecraft system applications requiring an electrically conductive or dissipative outer surface, the MLI blanket 10 may also include an electrically conductive layer 90 over the anti-contamination coating 80, such as is shown in FIG. 1. In some
15 embodiments, the electrically conductive layer 90 may instead be between the anti-contamination coating 80 and the high emittance layer 70. Regardless of its location, the electrically conductive layer 90 is comprised of a transparent, electrically conductive material such as, for example, Indium Tin Oxide, Indium Oxide, or other equivalent materials. Typically the electrically conductive layer 90 is in the range of about 50 to
20 250 angstroms thick. Having the electrically conductive layer 90 on the outside allows for easy post-application electrical conductivity measurement. When the electrically conductive layer 90 is underneath the anti-contamination coating 80, the relatively thin anti-contamination coating 80 allows electrons incident on the MLI blanket 10 to burrow through the anti-contamination coating 80 into the electrically conductive layer 90.

FIG. 2 shows a perspective view of a typical satellite communications spacecraft
25 100 upon which MLI blankets 10 such as shown in FIG. 1 are utilized to provide thermal protection for various portions of the spacecraft 100. The MLI blankets 10 are shaped to cover various portions of the spacecraft 100, including the sides of an antenna 102 and several panels 104 on the body of the spacecraft 100. The MLI blankets 10 are attached
30 with the high emittance layer 70, anti-contamination coating 80, and electrically conductive layer 90, if any, facing outward (i.e., facing space) using, for example, hook

and loop material (e.g. Velcro®), adhesive, pressure sensitive tape, or a combination of all. When the spacecraft 100 is in space, various portions of the spacecraft 100 can be exposed to substantial solar radiation 110 for various periods of time depending factors such as the orbital path and orientation of the spacecraft 100. The anti-contamination coating 80 reduces the solar absorptance of the outer metallized layer 20 of the MLI blankets 10 covering the various portions 102, 104 of the spacecraft 100. In this regard, the anti-contamination coating 80 preferably maintains the solar absorptance of the outer metallized layer 20 at a value of 0.12 or less. This results in an outer surface temperature of the MLI blankets 10 in space of -25 °C, thereby reducing solar heat transmitted through the MLI blankets 10 by at least 50% as compared with similar thickness MLI blankets lacking the anti-contamination coating 80.

The anti-contamination coating 80 reduces the solar absorptance of the outer metallized layer 20 of the MLI blankets 10 by reducing the presence of organic residues on the outer metallized layer 20. Such organic residues can form from organic materials and the like present, for example, in the components of the spacecraft 100 (e.g., composite panels and members, electronic components), in paints used on the spacecraft 100, and in materials used in assembling the spacecraft 100 (e.g., sealants and adhesives), that are more readily vaporized in the vacuum conditions of space. The photocatalytic material comprising the anti-contamination coating 80 on the outer surface 20A of the outer metallized layer 20 is excited by the UV or near UV components of the solar radiation 110 to generate free carriers. The resulting conduction-band electrons and valence-band holes can then interact with bound oxygen in the organic residues to form radicals and thereby break down the organic contaminants so that they evaporate into space. By reducing the presence of organic residues on the outer surface 20A of the outer metallized layer 20, the reflective properties of the MLI blanket 10 are maintained thereby reducing solar absorptance.

EXAMPLES

The following examples illustrate certain aspects of the present invention such as the capability of decomposing organic materials via photocatalytic processes utilizing bound oxygen from absorbing residues in the vacuum conditions of space. The examples

are not intended to be comprehensive of all features and all embodiments of the present invention, and should not be construed as limiting the claims presented herein. Furthermore, in the following examples, the various photocatalytic coatings were tested on quartz substrates such as may be employed in an optical solar reflector (OSR) as opposed to metallized Kapton®, Mylar®, or the like. However, similar results are anticipated for the photocatalytic coatings when used on metallized Kapton®, Mylar®, or the like. The experiments were performed under vacuum condition to simulate space environments, and a thermal quartz crystal microbalance (TQCM, sensitivity: $1.56 \text{ ng.Hz}^{-1}.\text{cm.}^{-2}$) was employed to monitor organic contaminant deposition.

Example 1

In this first example, a thin layer TiO_2 (photocatalyst, 2~40 nm) was coated on a TQCM surface, and organic contaminants were then deposited on the TQCM sensor with or without UV radiation. The deposition rate of the organics was monitored by recording the frequency change (i.e., mass change) of TQCM sensors. FIG. 3 shows typical TQCM results. As seen in FIG. 3, the rate of organics deposition on TiO_2 -coated surface was significantly lower compared to that at the plain TQCM surface under UV radiation. These results suggested that TiO_2 coatings are effective in preventing organic residues, which are further supported by the fact that a significant increase in deposition rate was observed when no UV radiation was applied. In addition, the experiments also demonstrated that pre-deposited organic films on TiO_2 surfaces can be partially removed under UV illumination (FIG. 4). In this case, frequency decrease at the TiO_2 -coated TQCM sensor with a thin organic film was observed upon UV radiation, which indicated the removal of such materials. On the other hand, significantly less change in frequency was seen for a plain TQCM (no TiO_2 coating) sensor under similar conditions. To investigate the effect of TiO_2 coating on the optical properties of the substrate, the absorption coefficient was measured as a function of TiO_2 thickness. The results showed that essentially no change was observed on substrates with such a thin TiO_2 coating. In summary, the test data obtained clearly indicates that TiO_2 coating is effective.

Example 2

In this example, a thin layer of WO_3 (i.e., less than 200 nm in thickness) was coated on a quartz substrate, and organic contaminants (dioctyl phthalate) were then pre-deposited on the WO_3 surface. The test sample was then placed in an ultrahigh vacuum chamber (UHV, 10^{-10} ~ 10^{-11} torr) and radiated with UV light. Mass spectrometry was used to detect potential decomposition products of the organic contaminants. For photocatalytic processes, one of the decomposition products is carbon dioxide (CO_2). The graph of FIG. 5 shows CO_2 response as a function of UV radiation time. Here, the circles denote a WO_3 sample exposed to UV radiation at 9×10^{-10} torr. The triangles denote background condition (no sample) before WO_3 UV exposure. The squares denote background condition (no sample) after WO_3 UV exposure. As is seen in FIG. 5, a significant increase in CO_2 signal was observed compared to the background signal when the test sample was exposed to UV radiation. This demonstrates the occurrence of photocatalytic processes at the surface. The results revealed that WO_3 is photocatalytically effective in preventing and/or removing organics under vacuum conditions.

Example 3

In this example, a thin layer of ZnO (i.e., less than 200 nm in thickness) was coated on a quartz substrate, and organic contaminants (dioctyl phthalate) were then pre-deposited on the ZnO surface. The sample was then placed in an ultrahigh vacuum chamber (UHV, 10^{-10} ~ 10^{-11} torr) and radiated with UV light. Mass spectrometry was used to detect potential decomposition products of the organic contaminants. For photocatalytic processes, one of the decomposition products is carbon dioxide (CO_2). FIG. 6 shows CO_2 response as a function of UV radiation time. Here, the circles denote a ZnO sample exposed to UV radiation at 8×10^{-10} torr. The triangles denote background condition (no sample) before ZnO UV exposure. The squares denote background condition (no sample) after ZnO UV exposure. As is seen in FIG. 6, significant increase in CO_2 signal was observed compared to the background signal when the sample was exposed to UV radiation. This demonstrates the occurrence of photocatalytic processes at

the surface. The results revealed that ZnO is photocatalytically effective in preventing and/or removing organics under vacuum conditions.

The above examples clearly indicate that other photoactive semiconductor materials in addition to TiO_2 , WO_3 , and ZnO, including but not limited to, CaTiO_3 , SnO_2 ,
5 MoO_3 , NbO_5 , Fe_2O_3 , Ta_2O_5 , and $\text{Ti}_X(\text{Zr}_{1-X})\text{O}_2$, where X has a value of between 0 and 1., and SiC, should prove effective in removing and/or decomposing organic materials from the substrate surface under vacuum conditions (e.g., space environment).

While various embodiments of the present invention have been described in detail, further modifications and adaptations of the invention may occur to those skilled
10 in the art. However, it is to be expressly understood that such modifications and adaptations are within the spirit and scope of the present invention.